ABU SAYYAF

by

Billye G. Hutchison

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Abu Sayyaf

Billye G. Hutchison

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The Author

Lieutenant Colonel Billye G. Hutchison is the Deputy Commander of the 379th Expeditionary Medical Group, 379th Air Expeditionary Wing, Southwest Asia. This composite wing includes strike; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; mobility; aeromedical evacuation; and command and control assets which support operations IRAQI FREEDOM, ENDURING FREEDOM and Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa.

She is second in command of a deployed wartime medical group responsible for providing or arranging for outpatient, inpatient, and emergency care for over 9,000 Air Force, joint and coalition forces. She oversees an in-theater care program and Aeromedical Evacuation mission and is responsible for the blood-product movement program within the entire CENTCOM theater. Lieutenant Colonel Hutchison ensures readiness for disaster/attack response and consequence management, and establishes policies to prevent disease and improve the health of the base population. She is also the 379th Expeditionary Medical Group Chief Nurse and oversees, establishes, and enforces standards of nursing care and practice of assigned nursing personnel. She obtained a direct commission and entered active duty June 1986. She has served in various clinical and administrative nursing assignments in military treatment facilities and commanded at the squadron level.

Lieutenant Colonel Hutchison holds a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the University of Arkansas, a Master of Science in Operations Management from University of Arkansas, a Master of Science in Nursing from the University of Oklahoma, and a Doctorate in Organization and Management from Capella University. She is a native of Arkansas, and she and her husband, Richard, have a daughter, Brandi, son-in-law, Brad, and two grandchildren, Kristen and Colin.

Abu Sayyaf

Billye G. Hutchison

Introduction

Abu Sayyaf originated and began operations in the southern Philippines, in particular the Basilan province. Poverty conditions and the Muslim population's history in the area provided a foundation for the birth and survival of this group. Widespread unemployment and an estimated 30% of the population below the poverty level in 2003[1] contributed to the recruiting pool of unskilled and unemployed young men who willingly follow others for money.[2]

From the beginning, Abu Sayyaf group, also known as ASG, consisted of an alliance system traditionally found in other Muslim territories. The alliance identified with ASG is called a minimal familial alliance with membership obtained from the same or neighboring communities. A group benefit is the followers' anonymity making group members hard to locate because they belong in the local areas and blend within the population. The close ties and anonymity help to account for these groups' longevity.[3]

Under the directives and guidance of founder Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani Abu Sayyaf, though always violence based,[4] gained notoriety, media attention, and government focus because of escalating levels of violence in their attacks against Christian missionaries and their destruction through urban bombings. A later addition was kidnapping for ransom. One such example was the 2000 Dos Palmos Resort incident on Palawan Island in which two hostages, one an American, were beheaded.[5]

Abu Sayyaf's Beginning and History

The Philippine's Muslim population has a history of unrest traceable to the 17th century Spanish colonizers. The Filipino Muslims, called

Moros, resided in two places within the Philippine archipelago, Mindanao, the large island south of Luzon, and the Sulu island chain southwest of Mindanao. This group revolted against their Spanish colonizers and periodic revolts continued through time. In the early 20th century there were revolts against American rules and, even after gaining independence in 1946, uprisings continued intermittently against successive Philippine governments. The Moros' grievances focused on expansion of geographic settlements by Catholic Filipinos on Mindanao which encroached on the geographical area of the Muslim majority.[6]

In the 1970s the Muslim population of the southern Philippines revolted under the auspices of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and demanded an independent Muslim state. Negotiations occurred between MNLF and the Philippine government until an agreement was reached between the two parties in 1996 which created an autonomous Muslim region in the Basilan province but resulted in a split governance system for the province. Isabela City, the capital city of the province, is administered through the non-Islamic political system of the Zamboanga Peninsula on the most southern tip of Mindanao. The rest of the province is under the direction of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).[7]

Unfortunately, after the agreement the MNLF splintered into two large groups, the MNLF and a newly created second group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MINF). This group sought to gain independence for Muslim populated regions and form a Muslim state based on strict "Koranic principles."[8] Philippine military operations soon ensued against MILF and, since the early 2000s, Basilan province has been a region of insurrection between Philippine government troops and the Muslim separatist groups.[9] A cease-fire was declared in 2001 and periodic peace negotiations have been attempted since that time,[10] but the activities of Abu Sayyaf did not end.

Abu Sayyaf Leadership

The origin of Abu Sayyaf came from the beliefs and experiences of Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, chief founder and leader of the Abu Sayyaf separatist organization he created in 1991. Janjalani was one of five children born to Abubakar Janjalani, a Muslim farmer and landowner,

and Vilma Montano-Janjalani, a Christian. He and his siblings grew up in the Tabuk barrio of Isabela City on Basilan Island.[11]

In the 1980s, Abdurajak Janjalani was fortunate to be connected with and educated by the Al Islamic Tabligh. This Muslim fundamentalist organization was financially supported by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan; through their funding young Muslim men were sent to Middle Eastern schools to study. Janjalani was one of those fortunate young men and traveled to both Saudi Arabia and Libya for his education.[12] He also traveled to different Muslim countries and received training and education in radical Islamic thought, and through his studies and travels became radicalized himself.[13]

While in Saudi Arabia in 1981 he received a strong education in Islam and then studied the Islamic philosophy of law in Mecca for three years. During this time period he became deeply interested and attracted to the concept of "jihad"[14] and after further studies of theology and Arabic he took on the role of teacher.[15]

Upon his return to Basilan in 1984 his initial vocational pursuit was to preach in various mosques, however Janjalani traveled to Peshawar, Pakistan in 1988 to study the Islamic revolution in Iran. This is where he reportedly met and befriended Osama bin Laden.[16] It is alleged that they both fought in Afghanistan during the Soviet war and were students and supporters of radical Islamic teachings. As a result of his Afghan war experiences and connections, Janjalani allegedly had close links with many other Islamic radical leaders and through his friendship with Osama bin Laden it was suspected that he had developed strong ties to Al Qaeda.[17]

After the Afghan war, Janjalani formed a group of like-minded individuals to advance the idea of an Iranian-inspired Islamic State in the southern Philippines. His followers were possibly made up of disillusioned members of the Moro National Liberation Front and fellow Filipinos who had experienced the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union.[18] This group was formally established in 1988 yet initially had no formally recognized name. However, by 1989 Janjalani called the group the Mujahideen Commando Freedom Fighters (MCFF) which became the rudimentary membership of the future Abu Sayyaf Group.[19]

MCFF was initially reported to be part of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) but Janjalani solidified the MCFF and the group

officially broke away from the MNLF in 1991. It became a faction to support and pursue Janjalani's ideology for a separate Muslim state and took on a new name, Abu Sayyaf.[20] The group's name transition resulted from Janjalani's assumed name of "Abu Sayyaf" during the Afghan war, a name he had taken to honor Professor Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the Afghan resistance leader.[21] According to Rommel Banlaoi, this name is frequently translated incorrectly to mean "bearer of the sword" when, in actuality, in Arabic it translates to "Father of the Swordsmen."[22]

Ideology

Abdurajak Janjalani's religious and political thoughts provided the basis for ASG's original ideology.[23] The initial premise for creating the group was for a Muslim Mujahideen that would be committed to "a struggle in the cause of Allah" or "fighting and dying for the cause of Islam."[24] To his ASG followers Janjalani was more than a leader, he provided their ideological path and enlightenment.

Janjalani was well educated and knowledgeable of various areas that impacted the Muslim population in the Philippines. These included the historical, religious, economic, political, and social conditions that existed at the time[25] and it was his aim to build his idea of an Islamic state in the southern Philippines to improve those conditions.[26] Funding to initiate and support the movement in the beginning was supposedly supplied by Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law.[27] This was the first reported link to Al Qaeda.

Later, in 1992, Janjalani and his group established an official headquarters in Isabela, Basilan naming the Camp Al-Madinah Mujahideen, but the camp was captured by the Philippine Marines in 1993 forcing ASG to relocate and establish a new base in Patikul, Sulu. This fostered greater cooperation and alliance with Ghalib Andang who led the Sulu-based unit of the ASG.[28] Working together the combined ASG forces began an aggressive recruiting effort to expand their manpower, acquire arms and munitions, and began the lucrative series of fund-raising activities in kidnappings and demanding high ransoms.[29]

Before his death in 1998, Janjalani delivered eight radical ideological messages called Khutbahs. These Khutbahs are regarded as primary sources of his radical Islamic thought and depicted the depth of his

understanding of Wahabi Islam. One of the Khutbahs exposed an intense resentment of Christian missionaries in Mindanao, especially those regarded as criticizing Islam. His interpretation was that "aggressive preaching of Christian missionaries in Mindanao thus insulted Islam and provoked Muslims to respond violently. As a result, the bombing of the Christian missionary ship M/V Doulos in 1991 was retaliation against Christian missionaries who used derogatory words against Islam and called Allah a false God."[30]

Recruiting, Funding, and Ties to Al Qaeda

Group membership steadily increased in number due to the series of successful kidnappings of students, teachers, and administrators from several Basilan public schools in addition to kidnapping of tourists. The reported age range for new recruits was from 15 to 20 and each was offered a high-powered rifle and monthly salary. If successful in their group endeavors, recruits had opportunities to move into paid support positions for the group. Ransoms received created the means to pay alliance leaders and followers but also allowed for the purchase of weapons. Money also flowed from group members into the neighborhoods close to camp locations to gain support and cooperation from the local residents.[31]

These community alliances brought the group widespread support in various districts[32] and, despite its small size, Abu Sayyaf drew strength from a huge local support base since most members are relatives, friends, classmates, and neighborhood associates. The group supports local merchants and is rewarded by receiving "early warning signals" from local communities during military offensives and local support through manpower, intelligence, and logistics.[33]

In addition to the funding acquired by paid ransoms, the group sought to gain additional foreign funding. To this end, in 1994 Janjalani renamed the ASG as the Islamic Movement which reportedly improved financial and logistical support from outside organizations sympathetic to the same cause. These included Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, and Algeria. Of specific interest is that the largest assistance allegedly came from the International Islamic Relief Organization

operated by an already familiar name, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law.[34]

However other ties between Al Qaeda and ASG were established after Ramzi Yousef arrived in the Philippines in 1994. During the time of his operations in the Philippines he was reported to have trained Janjalani's ASG fighters and to have established an Al Qaeda cell in Manila. He was possibly an integral link in strengthening the ties between ASG and Al Qaeda in addition to the ties resulting from the personal friendship between Janjalani and Osama bin Laden.[35]

Terroristic Acts and Capabilities

In August 1991 the M/V Doulos, a Christian missionary ship docked at the Zamboanga port, was attacked with a bomb. The explosion resulted in the deaths of two foreign missionaries and wounding of 40 others. This was the first time Janjalani publicly used the name ASG as the group claimed credit for the attack and international media immediately broadcast news of the bombing and the resultant casualties. In May 1992, the ASG stepped onto the international media stage again when it assassinated Father Carzedda, an Italian Catholic priest working as a missionary in Mindanao. This time, Janjalani wrote an open letter claiming ASG responsibility for Father Carzedda's death and warned of additional violent actions in the future to attain its Islamist goals.[36]

Terrorist acts and kidnappings continued through the years until Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani's life ended in 1998 during a conflict with the Philippine police force.[37] After his death the group fragmented into two factions with a combined total of 26 large armed groups acting independently of each other. Both factions moved away from the founding ideological concepts and farther toward gang actions with terrorism-for-profit in their choice of kidnappings for ransom.[38] The group would remain fragmented and would not see a centralized leadership emerge again until 2005 under Abdurajak Janjalani's brother, Khadaffy Janjalani.

During the interim period between the brother's leadership, Abu Sayyaf was reported to have manpower strength of approximately 1,000 members and the two factions increased kidnapping operations aimed at foreigners. Lucrative kidnapping operations continued in April 2000

when forces purchased and used fast speed boats to expand their area of operations and attack a tourist resort in the Malaysian state of Sabah. Twenty-one foreigners were kidnapped in that operation and by July 2000 the group had attacked again and seized three French journalists. Hostages were later released after ransom payments reported to be in the millions of dollars were paid by European governments.[39]

One of the most notorious Abu Sayyaf attacks occurred in 2000 against the Dos Palmos tourist resort located on Palawan, the largest and most western island of the Philippines. The group again used speedboats as they made the 300-mile trip across the Sulu Sea to reach the resort. Twenty people were kidnapped, including three Americans and one, Guillermo Sobero of Corona, California, was beheaded by the group during his captivity. Two Christian missionaries from Wichita, Kansas, Martin and Gracia Burnham, and a Filipino nurse, Deborah Yap, were part of the hostage group and remained hostages as, over time, most of the others were released for a reported ransom of $1 million each. The three hostages remained within Abu Sayyaf's control through 2000 and 2001 as, in a continuation of the same lucrative practice, the group kidnapped numerous Filipinos from Basilan and Mindanao. Some of these hostages were released after ransoms were paid while others were executed.[40]

By June 2002, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) received intelligence information indicating Abu Sayyaf had moved their remaining three hostages from Basilan to the Zamboanga peninsula of Mindanao. AFP conducted an assault on the team holding the hostages resulting in the rescue of Gracia Burnham, but Martin Burnham and Deborah Yap were killed during the operation.[41]

Recentralized Leadership and Expanded Terrorism

It wasn't until 2005, after the 2002 death of Abu Sabaya commander of the Basilan area faction, and the 2003 death of Galib Andang commander of the Sulu faction,[42] that Janjalani's brother, Khadaffy Janjalani was able to gain control of the factions of Abu Sayyaf. He united the two and began to move the group back toward its original political objective and ideology[43] while consolidating operations and leadership in Mindanao.[44]

As Khadaffy established control, kidnappings were deemphasized and the focus shifted to development of skills in urban bombing. Ties were improved with the MILF and cooperation was initiated with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a Southeast Asian militant Islamist group widely known and associated with the Bali nightclub bombing in 2002.[45] The new and improved skills were quickly utilized in 2003 with bombings carried out in Davao on Mindanao causing 48 casualties. Additional plots and explosives cache to conduct bombings in Manila and the U.S. embassy were discovered in 2004 by the Philippine Government and disclosed in a government report.[46]

The bombing operations continued in April 2004 and Abu Sayyaf's bombing practices were brought to the world's attention with the bombing of a Manila-based ferry, the SuperFerry 14. The ferry carried almost 900 passengers and 194 passengers were killed in the suicide bombing attack.[47] The group claimed responsibility but not as a single entity. Instead, the operation was completed in conjunction with the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), radical Filipino Muslim converts from the northern Philippines and the Manila area.[48]

This further expansion of ASG's terrorist group ties, not only with JI but now with the addition of RSM, broadened the availability of manpower, skills, and planning capabilities to conduct and expand terrorist operations. Outcomes of this coordination were enhanced technical skills and operational proficiency indicated by the February 2005 operation when three simultaneous bombings occurred in three cities.[49] With Khadaffy's presumed death in 2006[50] resulting from a confrontation with government troops, the group is again reported to be without central leadership and is reportedly returning to kidnapping for ransom.

Philippine Economy and Terrorism's Impact

The Philippines have great potential to become a tourist destination in the Southeast Asia region, but since the 1990s the industry has been afflicted by natural disasters such as volcano eruptions as well as higher fuel costs making travel more expensive. In spite of these occurrences, tourism receipts peaked in 1997 at close to $3 billion but by 2000 had dropped to less than $2 billion.

Tourism is a part of the Philippine's gross domestic product and this revenue decreases substantially when terroristic acts occur. Therefore, part of this decline can possibly be attributed to the increased frequency of violent actions by Abu Sayyaf and their renown for beheading hostages. Evidence of just such a relationship between terrorism and declining tourism was provided by the large departure of foreign tourists after the Dos Palmos resort kidnappings.[51]

Terrorism makes regions unstable and thus unattractive locations for business investment when company personnel and their families cannot be easily protected. Many businesses transfer assets and industry out of countries after risk to their personnel become too high, or they stop doing business with a country entirely because of terrorist activities and safety concerns. As a result, the terrorism risk has negative consequences on the labor market with substantial lowering in the quality of local employment opportunities and compensation available to the country's population.[52] This may be reflected in the Philippine's 2002 status report which indicated widespread unemployment and underemployment with rates of 10.3% and 15.9% respectively though 2008 figures indicate a decrease in unemployment rate to 7.3%.[53]

Terrorist actions of Abu Sayyaf and affiliated groups can also disrupt world trade and globalization[54] by restricting trade. The Philippine Islands have several import and export partnerships with countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the United States and these trade partnerships are dependent on security of commercial sea travel in the surrounding bodies of water, and safe passage through the Luzon strait into the China Sea area.[55] According to the International Maritime Bureau, these routes may be in jeopardy from maritime terrorism.

There are increasing numbers of reports of piracy and armed robbery against ships traveling in the territorial and offshore waters of the South China Sea off the western coasts of the Philippine Islands. Numerous commercial vessels have been attacked and hijacked both at anchor and while underway, cargo diverted to ports in East Asia, and crews murdered or cast adrift.[56] There are reports that ASG has conducted such operations around the Philippine Islands of Sulu and Basilan province and the Tawi-Tawi chain stretching to the coast of Malaysia. Activities include a maritime version of kidnapping for ransom as ASG boarded vessels and kidnapped the crews.[57]

The United States government is also concerned with apparent MILF, JI, and ASG links orchestrating transfer of terrorists and bomb components between the Philippines and Indonesia. Further indications and confirmation of continued or expanded MILF and ASG terrorist operations could result in suspension of multi-million dollar aid projects to the Philippines which would significantly impact the country's economic condition. Another potential option would be consideration of U.S. military involvement.[58]

The terrorist threat is not the only area of concern for the Philippines, there is also the domestic growth of methamphetamine production. The problem has grown extensively in recent years until the island is now recognized as a major consumer of amphetamines and a longstanding marijuana producer in rural areas where Manila's control is limited.[59] The drug trade brings with it additional societal and political problems but also has the potential to become a larger regional market and a source of income for terrorist groups.

Threats to U.S. and International Security

Abu Sayyaf has reportedly committed 378 terrorist activities resulting in 288 civilian deaths. Through further ventures into the kidnapping-for-profit realm the group conducted 640 kidnapping activities totaling 2,076 victims.[60] Terrorist groups like Abu Sayyaf are able to tap into a pool of disillusioned and disgruntled youth by using rhetoric that has ideological appeal for some while the allure of money and adventure entices others. For the jobless, the promise of a better standard of living compared to any of the other legal economic opportunities in their locale has a strong appeal.[61] This can result in an unlimited recruit pool.

ASG may have expanded their activities to include munitions trading[62] and have received training, arms, and other support from Al Qaeda and terrorist groups located in the Middle East. Hostages who have escaped and ASG defectors describe Middle Easterners and Afghans as instructors in Abu Sayyaf training camps. There are documented ties to JI through ASG requests for training in bomb assembling and detonation and subsequent conduction of joint bombing operations. In fact, Abu Sayyaf collaboration with JI and MILF was exposed in reports connecting two Indonesian JI

members involved in the 2002 Bali bombing with Abu Sayyaf forces on Jolo.[63]

ASG's collaboration with RSM may indicate a desire to extend recruitment and operations into the northern Philippines. RSM has received financial and training support from MILF and the collaboration suggests that key MILF leaders could intertwine operations with JI and ASG to maintain a high terrorist threat in the region instead of reaching a settlement or continue negotiation for independence with the Philippine government.[64] There is also evidence of growing cooperation between MILF and JI with the possibility for JI to make Mindanao a primary base to build up its terrorist cadre. Already, two JI key leaders have relocated from Indonesia to Jolo in the Sulu islands. Transformation of Mindanao into a primary operating base instead of merely remaining a training site appears to be occurring and may increasingly target the Philippines for terrorist attacks. As a result of these ties, capabilities of the ASG may be growing.[65]

Abu Sayyaf has equipped itself well using their illegal finances. Purchases of weapons and technical capabilities were evident in government seizures of night-vision devices, thermal imagers, sniper scopes, commercial radios, satellite and cellular phones and high-speed boats. As a result of joint training with JI, members have enhanced bomb-making abilities. Out of joint training operations has come the new ability to use car bombs to hit major targets in major Philippine cities. The group's maritime and underwater training facilitates their ability to expand attacks on targets such as ports and commercial vessels.[66] The group's talents, capabilities, and reach are expanding.

In regard to maritime terrorism, Southeast Asia is quickly gaining recognition as the world's hot spot because of piracy incidents. Abu Sayyaf already has the knowledge and capability to wage maritime terrorism as depicted in previously described attacks on the M/V Doulos, the Dos Palmas resort, and the Super ferry 14.[67] Once predominantly land-based, the group is becoming more maritime focused.[68]

There are beginning to be claims that ASG factional leaders on Jolo have established collaborative links with the military, police, and government officials.[69] If proven to be true, this does not bode well for elimination of the threats this group presents to the Philippines and the Southeast Asian region.

Conclusion

Abu Sayyaf continues to be regarded as the most violent and lethal Muslim separatist group in the Philippines with enhanced capabilities to wage traditional bombing activities, conduct maritime attacks, and suicide terrorist missions.[70] Their stronghold remains the island groups of Sulu and Basilan in the southern Philippines but there is evidence of growth into northern Philippines with the combined resources of RSM.[71] Overall group size is currently reported to be diminished to an approximate 400 members.[72] Through the group's reported links with Al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah with their own locations in Indonesia and cells in the Philippines, MILF and MNLF in the Philippines their growth and potential for lethality continues to expand. Abu Sayyaf also has the "distinction" of being considered an ally to Al Qaeda against the United States.[73]

The spread of terrorist groups and activities in the Philippines may be connected by commonalities in goals, the attraction of large sums of money, and the media attention given to effective group operations. Joined together, they increase the region's threat. Should the groups ultimately coalesce, their concerted efforts and diverse, expanding terrorist capabilities and actions will significantly impact the Southeast Asian region. With today's globalized market and international linkages, repercussions from terrorist actions could well expand past that region to be felt throughout the world.

Recognition of the different contexts that may contribute to the rise in terrorism is essential and requires an approach that combines various perspectives for reform that target those contributing areas.[74] This will require close cooperation of regional states to address the terrorist threat.[75] The goal is to eventually eliminate the reason these factions are born, expand, and continue to exist. Until that occurs, groups such as Abu Sayyaf will remain a threat to their local region and country, but have the potential to spread onto the international realm and threaten the national and security interests of Southeast Asia and the international community.

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